

NATIVE FATHERHOOD

Story of the Alaska Native Fatherhood Movement

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### Abstract

This paper recants the genesis of the Alaska Native fatherhood movement, including an overview of the significant leaders and contexts, through which momentum was gained. Relevant features and considerations that distinguish the movement from its mainstream will be highlighted. The story will be told in the form of an empowerment narrative, from the perspective of the author, who played a prominent role in Alaska's early fatherhood practice. A historical timeline will be established, outlining significant programs and practices during the epoch of 2000-2006, throughout the State of Alaska. All of the information presented is current, and professional names and affiliations are provided for practitioners and others who wish to inquire for more information.

### Story of the Alaska Native Fatherhood Movement

From what I have learned, a story only exists so long as it is told. Therefore, I am honored to articulate the genesis of the Alaska Native fatherhood movement, or at least the version I have been privileged to know. During some social movements, the victory is remembered at the beginning of an event, rather than at the end. I have been blessed to participate in the movement since 2004, upon acceptance of a fatherhood position, drafting me from another of Denver, Colorado. Little did I know of the journey that awaited me up North. I remember being full of fire, cultivated through the charismatic passion of pioneering practitioners, who had interwoven conscious efforts to encourage fathers throughout health, service and educational contexts. Due to their scarcity, fatherhood practitioners throughout the United States value keeping networked with one another, for consultation and dialogue. I was excited to hear that Alaska was ripe to commence their movement. After all, like others, I had long-ago been convinced of the importance of fathers and their natural relationship with children.

Although it has taken on a life of it's own, Alaska's fatherhood movement has been influenced by the mainstream, contemporary (e.g. Horn, Blankenhorn & Pearlstein, 1999). Although there was a political platform tracing back to the 1960's, the roots of the mainstream fatherhood movement are frequently attributed to the time period of early 1980's. Charles Ballard, considered as one of the founders of fatherhood practice, began working with non-custodial fathers in a home-visit format in Cleveland, founding the *Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization*, in 1982. Also during that epoch, fatherhood, as a research agenda also commences. In 1981, Doctors' James Levine, Michael Lamb and Joseph Pleck formed *The Fatherhood Project* at Bank Street College of Education in New York City. The project served "as a national research, demonstration, and dissemination project to identify, test,

and promote best practices for supporting the involvement of fathers in the lives of children” (Sylvester, 1999, p.1). Even though it is conceivable that there are other catalysts of Alaska’s fatherhood movement, which are not tied to the etic, organizational manifestations of fatherhood work are traced to these beginnings. This does not imply, however, that fathers have not been actively and responsibly involved in their children’s lives. Nor does it mean that this is the etiology of a communal consciousness to encourage and support men in their role as fathers. In fact, when I consider Native ways of thought, I am implored to believe that the current movement is nothing more than a recurring cycle that may be lending to correct natural familial imbalances which modern living situations have led to.

Alaska gained Statehood in 1959—its setting is both unique and isolated, with abundant resources and an extreme climate. Indigenous peoples have lived in harmony with the land in these arctic and sub arctic, altitudes for thousands of years, since time began. Alaska is reflected in their identity and cultural schema. In my experience, I have come to learn that there is an organic preference, particularly in this case, for ideas / ideology and interventions. Among the people there is a notion to be cautious, suspicious and reluctant to embrace foreign concepts. This may be a result of forced acculturation that has occurred in the past, originating from cultural imperialists of Russia, Canada and the United States. “Notions of tradition and healing are central to contemporary efforts by Aboriginal peoples to confront the legacy of historical injustices and suffering brought on by the history of colonialism” (Kirmayer, Simpson & Cargo, 2003).

It is widely perceived to be weary of the many behavioral health and educational approaches, which are formulated on other demographics, in other locations, that are inherently different cultures than those found of Alaska. Many foreign behavioral health providers and

clergy have either committed iatrogenics, or have not connected well with the indigenous local population. Transplant providers frequently do not invest the long-term commitment of presence needed for sustained communal trust and change. Such things have increased a desire for emic knowledge and solutions.

Self-determination, defined as the right to live and make decisions in a locally generated manner, is a principle of considerable importance to Alaska's Native population, like it is with other indigenous groups, such as American Indians and First Nations peoples of North America. Therefore, I have always been cognizant to tread lightly, being that I am not from an Alaska Native culture of origin. I concur with Payne and Evan's (2007) admonition to "Be cautious about attempts to change Native systems that are already in place. Most people in Native communities establish relationships through many years of contact and familial connections; make an effort to learn these connections and the intricacies involved with each before deciding it needs to be changed" (p. 1). Nonetheless, curiosity arises about the comparative similarities and differences of fatherhood, and how father involvement is conceived according to an indigenous perspective. "The incursion of Western society has brought about many cultural and psychological disruptions to the flow of the life in traditional societies. Indigenous peoples have become subservient to the Western system and are confronted with new social structures that they do not always find compatible with their needs. This assimilative process often alters child-rearing practices..." (Kawagley, 2006, p. 1).

The most succinct framework in distinguishing the Alaska Native fatherhood movement from its' mainstream, relates to the notion of Native worldview. "Alaska Native peoples have traditionally tried to live in harmony with the world around them. This has required the construction of an intricate, subsistence-based worldview, a complex way of life with specific

cultural mandates regarding the ways in which the human being is to relate to their human relatives and the natural and spiritual worlds” (Kawagley, 2006, p. 8). Because worldview is useful for thinking, existing, and making sense of reality, it is easy to conceptualize how fatherhood is intertwined. In fact, it is something that is reciprocally shaped by the environment and circumstances of living. In Alaska, much of the population has limited or no access to road-system transportation. Thus, rural life, in traditional, primarily Native communities, as well as other, heterogeneous, hub communities, is quite different than the experience of fathers in large, urban areas.

Through my current three-year span of professional fatherhood practice in Alaska, I have learned that most of the challenges incurred by fathers are similar to those within the mainstream movement. This includes things such as having a low degree of involvement with children, emotionally, physically and financially. Many of the key indicators, as well as other relevant data about fathers and their influence on children and families can be found in the *National Fatherhood Initiative's* publication *Father Facts* (2007), although the publication does not include samples of, nor does it focus upon Alaska Natives or Native Americans. Patrick Anderson (Tlingit/ Aleut) (2004), one of the indigenous visionaries of Alaska's fatherhood movement, has highlighted several challenges in his early presentation “The Healing Power of Fatherhood” which described that there are cultural barriers to fatherhood, in that “it is not respected.” Although much of his rationale overlaps with mainstream themes, there is one divergent viewpoint, which is repeatedly overheard throughout Alaska: Roughly paraphrased, “that it is not of the culture for fathers to be involved with their children,” – or at least until children are into their preadolescent ages, at which time they are “ready” for their interface with men. Fatherhood practitioners have always taken issue with this remark.

From all of my knowledge, incorporating learnings from experience, books, testimony, and observations, critical bonding periods are lost with such a late-proposed period of involvement. Such opportunities come through caring for newborns, facilitating their child development; developing trust and attachment, providing guidance, etc. Most importantly, I have witnessed first-hand how it is indeed, the culture of Alaska Native men to care and attend to their children, as a matter of preference and choice. Some dads fulfill this role because their significant other's have obtained the limited jobs available in rural settings. It may also be that the *not the culture* rationale is an expression of resistance associated with the uncertainty of social change. Because the movement in Alaska is relatively recent, social consciousness has not yet hit the *tipping point* for monumental transformation. It cannot be denied however, that many men and fathers have made mistakes, such as being abusive, absent and neglectful towards their children and families. Many women, who are, overall, primary caregivers in non-custodial parental arrangements, have had negative experiences with the men whom they have fathered children with. Additionally, some Alaska Native groups, although not all, are matriarchal in nature, where family kinship, lineage and heritage is directed through women. Lastly, due to socio-political reasons, much of the early fatherhood funding was perceived to be a competition for scarce discretionary resources grafted from childcare program funding by the United States Department of Health and Social Services, Administration for Children and Families. As women are high consumers of such services, during 2004, I recall blanket emails circulating, urging people to contact policy makers in non-support of fatherhood programs. Rather than arguing a counter point for legitimacy, a more fitting discussion pertains to the value that the Alaska Native Fatherhood movement provides.

From a culturally universal framework, though the meaning of father involvement may not be succinctly articulated and defined, the expectancy, which has been actualized by the mainstream fatherhood movement, seems to apply well among Alaska Natives. Through my seven years of fatherhood practice, I have come to reduce the nature of fatherhood work into approximately three core areas, and several ancillaries: The first involves character education (Golden, 2007; Dudley, 2007). Like women, men are not inherently equipped to “know how to do their job” as a parent. They can however, learn the meaning of fatherhood, which includes understanding the morality behind the role, as examples, the values of a father, how risk-taking is conceptualized, and other aspects of maturity, especially during times of transition, such as when a man becomes a father. A second core area of the father involvement initiative involves building knowledge and skills in caring for children (Knoester, Petts, & Eggegeen, 2007). There are several ideas which come to mind, and many skill sets, such as dealing with child safety, overlap in the general area of parenting, suitable for men or women although, fathers are unique in some behaviors, such as play, and discipline (Brotherson & White, 2006). Though family and parenting services have been abundant for many years, they have been frequently dichotomized and hypermasculinated (Rothchild, 2007) to become feminine, and outside the realm for men, who are now marginalized in such milieu (Gaernter, Spinard, Eisenberg & Greying, 2007). Finally, there are ancillary areas for father involvement, including work with special father populations (such as fathers in prison, young fathers, fathers with disabilities, etc), father populations with special needs (such as child support enforcement, substance abuse recovery, employment, etc), and general family issues regarding fathers (such as fathers and marital/relational matters, fathers and community leadership) (Bronte-Tinkew, Ryan, Carrano & Moore, 2007; Lee, 2007).



The potential above is entrenched within a historically oppressed, albeit strong and resilient Native culture. Historical trauma abounds and permeates the Alaska Native population, confounding men and their various roles (Duran & Duran, 1995). Some of the extreme prevailing symptoms include occurrences of domestic violence, substance abuse, sexual predation and suicide, among other indicators of forced acculturation, such as loss of language and traditional ways. In the movement, fathers are viewed as an untapped communal resource, and it is no wonder that an Alaska Native initiative, with its locally determined scope and approach, is relevant for Alaskan families. The leadership of fathers is also future oriented, bearing that 37% of the population in 2000, was under the age of 18 years. “While no specific research seems to exist about Alaska Native Children and the impact of father absence, we have to be mindful of the small numbers of children we actually have, and our need to make sure that every one of them is successful” (Anderson, 2003 p. 2).

*W.o.l.f. to the Second Power*, an acronym for “the Work of Loving Father Figures” (WOLF2) initiative, arose among various Rural Alaska Community Action Program (Rural Cap) Head Start sites, which are located throughout Alaska, in rural, primarily Native communities. WOLF2 is the first fatherhood group in Alaska, forming approximately in 1999, in multiple Rural Cap sites (I.P-Gambel, personal communication, September, 15, 2004). However, it is unclear, who’s leadership influenced the emergence of this group. Currently, its membership is waning, due to various reasons. The Federal Head Start program serves 3-5 year old children, along with 0-2 year old children according to programmatic circumstances. Hence, when grass-roots leadership, such as this develops, frequently regarded as the ideal within the Head Start context, the father tend to stop being involved in Head Start once their children age out of the program. Nonetheless, the WOLF2 legacy continues to linger in a few villages of bush Alaska.

According to the time line, Cook Inlet Tribal Council's (CITC) *DAD*'s program was the next father-involvement program in Alaska. Upon being invited to give a lecture with my current director, Susan Labelle, at the University of Alaska at Anchorage, during an initial interview trip to Alaska, I discovered the movement had commenced. Fatherhood practitioners frequently look for traces or indicators of father friendly communities (Horn et al, 1999). One of the audience members, who were interdisciplinary Native students, gave me the name and business card of Lester Atkinson (Tsimshian), the program's lead case manager. That program was federally grant-funded, and designed for work with primarily non-custodial fathers who were court ordered to attend parenting classes. Gordon Wise Heart, an indigenous educator of San Angelo, Texas, then, with the *Healthy Families* program, was one of the initial trainers who assisted towards CITC's practice. Though it had lost its funding in FY06, CITC recently secured funding for a new fatherhood program *Fathers Journeys*, which is led by Frank Buck (Assiniboine/ Grovine), a colleague with experience in fatherhood practice through South Central Foundation Head Start. Cook Inlet Tribal Council is a Native family and social service organization, serving the Anchorage catchment area.

The *Boot Camp for New Dads*, a national program led by Chuck Ault of Denver Colorado, was another early program in Anchorage, affiliated with the birthing center of Providence hospital, and nearby military bases. This program was coordinated by Jennifer Aist, and provided a weekend experiential education workshop format for new fathers, upon the delivery of their children. However, reflective of the hospital's service demographic, there was not significant Native constituency involved in the program, although it did contribute to overall momentum and support of the movement.

Chugachmiut, a Native tribal health consortium organization, my current employer, was next in developing programming for fatherhood within Alaska. This was led the vision of Patrick Anderson, J.D., who became Executive Director of the organization in 2003. During that year, he enlisted Charles Stuart, a well-known African American leader and organizer of the mainstream fatherhood movement, to speak of father importance at the Alaska Federation of Natives Conference. Patrick next recruited me of Colorado in 2004 to join the “Alaska Native Fathers Matter” campaign, along with his cousin Tim Anderson (Alu’utiq). Per an early draft of a concept paper:

Alaska Native fathers care about their children and what happens to them. Many of us also care about what happens to the many Native children other than our own who grow up without an active fathers or positive male role model in their lives.... The purpose of this Proposal and Concept paper is to advocate for the creation of an Alaska Native fatherhood advocacy and program delivery organization consisting of successful Alaska Native fathers, grandfathers and other male relatives of children. (Anderson, 2003, p. 2)

After a year of planning and miscellaneous activity, Chugachmiut procured a major grant project to promote responsible fatherhood as a social and economic development strategy, though the Administration for Native Americans. This was the largest Federal procurement on Native fatherhood practice. It involved a saturation model, largely delivering psycho-educational workshops and activities, throughout the Chugach region of Prince William Sound and lower Kachemak Bay. The program currently exists, and has been integral in boosting the capacity of other organizations throughout the State who provide father involvement activities.

The Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (CCTHITA) was next to provide a fatherhood program, which commenced during 2005. Two key practitioners

included Harold Dick (Tlingit) and Tim Booth (Pima). Although born in Arizona, Booth was an early leader of Alaska's fatherhood movement, who provided original workshops at State and national conferences during 2004. In 2006, he was honored by Parent's Inc's' *Father of the year award*, although his formal position was in Indian Child Welfare. Dick's responsibility was coordinator for CCTHITA's fatherhood venture. Because the program was started with discretionary funding, his role was multifaceted, involving one on one visits, group workshops and advocacy. CCTHITA is one of the first and only tribal organizations of Alaska with a child support enforcement project, and much of their current fatherhood practice is related to topics within that umbrella, such as paternity establishment, employment and training, etc. CCTHITA is geographically located in Southeast Alaska, serving the indigenous clientele from that region of the state. Prior to Chugachmiut, Al Pooley (Navajo), of the Native American Fatherhood and Family Association, near Phoenix Arizona, spent significant time training CCTHITA for father involvement capacity.

As submitted previously, much of what has manifested in Alaska's fatherhood movement is tied to the larger national infrastructure, responsible for occurrences and momentum within "Indian Country." During July, 2004, a pivotal meeting took place in Seattle Washington, hosted by the National Indian Child Welfare Association, led by Terry Cross (Seneca). During the conference, attended by a key circle of indigenous leaders, fatherhood; its' meaning, application, and needs were explored. Not only did this include a formulation of research agenda, but it also included testimonials and presentations on emergent practices. That circle included a key Native leader who has been integral in Alaska, as well as in the national movement for Native American fatherhood, the aforementioned Albert Pooley.

As founder of the Native American Fatherhood and Family Association (NAFFA), Pooley has been working with families, fathers, mothers and children for many years, practicing as educator and counselor. He has developed one of the few existing Native American fatherhood curriculums entitled *Fatherhood is Sacred*, also providing training venues and program consultation. Across the United States, including multiple site visits within, and trainees of Alaska, NAFFA has established numerous chapters, including rural reservation contexts. Through grass roots leadership and passion, the organization has gained national stature. The approach involves approximately 6- 8 principles, of which, the first is “prayer to the Creator” (A. Pooley, personal communication, July, 23, 2004). The program has been formally evaluated by Joseph White, Ph.D., one of the few authors who has conducted research and published literature on Native American fathers. Although much has been learned from Pooley’s leadership, there has yet to emerge a thriving chapter of NAFFA in Alaska.

The United States Government has also greatly influenced Alaska’s fatherhood movement. In 1996, funding for fatherhood programs became available as a result of the revitalization of Welfare via the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act – PL 104. 193 (N.A.S.W. report). In 2005, the re-election of George Bush, provided the opportunity for long-time fatherhood advocate and child psychologist Wade Horn, Ph.D., to become Assistant Secretary of the Administration for Children and Families. Within the Administration for Native Americans, a discretionary branch of the Department of Health and Human Services, continued the appointment of Commissioner Quanah Crossland Stamps (Cherokee). The social policy and political service agenda opened up many opportunities for the Native American fatherhood movement to develop, as well as the Healthy Marriage Movement, throughout the nation, and in Alaska. Though previously the two movements scarcely inter-mingled, the social fact could no-

longer be ignored, that the biggest predictor of father involvement throughout a child's life is a strong marriage (Father Facts). Federal grants, as well as smaller Alaska State grants were made available to service organizations, including Native organizations, for such projects as a result.

The second governmental based push encouraging the father involvement movement in Alaska is via Head Start, which includes both tribal and non-tribal programs.

The Fatherhood Initiative is intended to strengthen the role of fathers in families. Strong families are essential to the future of the nation; both mothers and fathers play an essential role in ensuring the well-being of their children. Changes in the lives of fathers must be supported by the communities in which they live, and communities must know what resources and support are available to help in this effort. (n.d. Head Start info ctr.)

Consequently, there have been resources made available to bolster father involvement in Head Start. This has included several trainers, from out of State, and within, who have worked with village-based staff through itinerant visits and during regional, and national conferences. One memorable moment during a training conference in Juneau, was when former police officer Ben Cornell (Tlingit) demonstrated how he and his son has tested traditional wooden chest armor, subjecting it to knife jousts, sword slashes, and .22 bullet firearm discharge (needless to say, no one wore the breast plate during testing). Father and male involvement workshops continue to be provided there, on an annual basis since 2005 as a multi-day fatherhood track of the *Alaska Head Start Association* conference. Many fatherhood events, activities and workshops continue to be provided across Alaska, usually on a sporadic and small-scale basis, although aggregated, they occur quite regularly. In fact, Head Start may very well be the context through which the most significant work with fathers has occurred in AK.

Since commencement of the movement, there have been many other successes for Alaska's fledgling fatherhood movement. On a regular basis there are forward steps being taken, including the addition of new personalities to the movement, such as Simeon Quentin (Eskimo), who provided a salient testimony during an Alaska Native Oratory competition at the University of Alaska Anchorage in 2006. Trainings and information continue to be exchanged, which includes many behavioral health experts, such as Eduardo Duran, and others who promote overall family and community wellness. Another relevant program includes the *Family Wellness Warriors Initiative*, (FWWI) of Southcentral Foundation, a major health organization, located in Anchorage. The FWWI modality contains male, female and mixed-gender healing and support formats, combining mental health, spirituality, and peer based coaching techniques. Chino and DeBruyn (2006) submit "although some capacity-building models recognize the importance of community history, they have yet to consider the importance of culture, language, issues of identity and place, and the need for tribal people to operate in both traditional and dominant cultures" (p.597). FWWI, on the other hand, is considered one those programs worthy of praise. Working with fathers is sometimes just a continuum of family work, and in many locations, fatherhood activities are intergenerational and include women. This manifestation may be a function of Native worldview on the movement.

Values are important in the formulation of a social movement. Although to date, there has not yet been a concise articulation, it may very well be forthcoming. One of the only known inquiries on Alaska Native fatherhood occurred as a result of master's level social work students' research practicum. Crewdson, Holt, Johnson and Ruck (2005) conducted in-depth interviews with a 16-father sample, attempting to capture at least one member of each major indigenous

group, on the meaning of fatherhood. The following is an excerpt on values, used with permission:

The importance of sharing cultural and spiritual values with their children was a common theme in many respondents' interviews. They mentioned values such as the importance of caring for and learning from elders, learning traditional songs and dances, and living close to the land. They discussed the need for patience, humor, cooperation, and seeing the good in people, such as one respondent who remembered the counsel he received from an elderly chief, "you see that man, he just came back from jail, seven years, he needs our help... What they were teaching me was you look at the good in a person, how can we help that person who is going through a hard time." Treating others with respect and honesty were themes interwoven throughout all the interviews, as well as the importance of hard work and taking responsibility for your actions. As one respondent expressed so eloquently, "The gentleness of a warrior is the strongest weapon he can defend, a warrior that can express love, the strength of many... to be able to handle things gently, without violence, is to be more powerful than the strongest man."

Several respondents reflected on the importance of values in their childhood, and all of the respondents could remember at least one positive role model who helped pass on cultural and spiritual values to them. This was expressed by one middle-aged father, as he stated, "They said when you help other people it will come back to you and that's one memory I always had, a good memory, to help the elders," while another expressed his concern for the loss of cultural values, "I think that's what we're struggling with today; so many of those values have been forgotten." Some older fathers were reflecting back on lost opportunities, "I wish I would have taught them more about God and spirituality,"



while another stated, “I could have been a better father if I knew a lot of the teachings that our elders had.” One respondent with younger children expressed his hopes for his own children, “I want them to have that special thinking about their village” and “I want my children to be culturally grounded.” (p. 19-20)

Hand and hand with a quest for core values, it is expected that fathers and men alike will be seeking to find or redefine their roles. Only the future will reveal the course of the Alaska Native fatherhood movement. Such will make clear whether it continues in alignment with the national mainstream movement, or whether its path diverges. Certainly involved in the next step is the continual development of leadership, who will help set the immediate direction and long-term future course. This stage is relevant, currently forthcoming.

Although I do not bear the right, the Alaska Native fatherhood movement seems much to do with spirituality—encouraging things that are prosocial about father involvement including principles such as love. It is also a little about interrupting the cycle of antisocial and destructive behaviors. However, as I have learned, such a transformative process is not one to be rushed, nor taken lightly. As in the beginning, I continue to believe that there is much value in Alaska’s Native fathers rising forward in a fatherhood movement of their own. There are many more good things forthcoming as a result of this movement, and that, in the end, it will have led to a much needed difference in the lives communities and families. I have been proud to play my role in the Alaska Native fatherhood movement and hope that any positive contributions I have added may be for Him—glory to the Father.

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